



## Ciggles, guffaws and *out-and-out* belly laughs

Have a knee-slapping good time at Laughfest in Grand Rapids

BY RICH WARREN

ABOUT A YEAR AGO, I found myself in sweatpants, standing with a bunch of strangers and forcing myself to laugh like a hyena. I was taking a class in “Laughter Yoga.” The instructor maintained that even if it’s forced and not genuine, you still get all the physical and mental benefits that laughter provides.

She may well have had a point. I was not in a buoyant mood when I arrived, but when I left, I felt like a million dollars. There’d been lots of jumping up and down, rhythmic gestures and mirthful interactions with other participants — very enjoyable. For the rest of the day, everything struck me as funny.

And if *you* love to laugh, you are going to want to wend your way to snow-covered western Michigan to the jewel of a city known as Grand Rapids. There, from March 5 to 15, you’ll find an extravaganza of entertainment known as Laughfest.

During those 10 days, you’ll have your choice of more than 200 events in venues large and small that include performances by stand-up comics and improv troupes, live shows, films, author readings, even whimsical events like the “Funderwear Run,” should you feel like indulging in a 5K race in your underwear (worn tastefully atop your outerwear, of course — it’s cold in Michigan in March!).

More than 50,000 people made their way from 35 states and Canada to Grand Rapids in search of merriment last year. Did they find it? Just ask the 1,675 people who showed up wearing sunglasses to set a Guinness World Record. Obviously, Laughfest atten-

dees want to be part of the fun.

To say there’s “something for everyone” is an un-

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derstatement. Myself, I saw the legendary Lily Tomlin, who had us laughing even as she lay flat on her back onstage. I also went to a comic competition called “Best of the Midwest,” where the winning stand-up comedian took away a \$2,500 cash prize. It was hilarious — one comic observed, “I’m not in a romantic relationship right now. I’m married.” But a word of warning: The humor in this show can tend toward the raunchy. And oh yes, I learned to laugh and perform yoga at the same time. Other performers last year included the likes of Jay Leno, Sinbad, Chris Tucker and Mike Birbiglia.

This year, the fifth for Laughfest, the stand-up comics expected include:

- **Wanda Sykes**, named by *Entertainment Weekly* as one of the 25 Funniest People in America.
- **Patton Oswalt**, whose comedy specials have been Grammy nominated.
- **Billy Gardell**, star of the CBS hit television series *Mike & Molly*.
- **George Lopez**, whose career encompasses TV and film, as well as stand-up comedy.
- **Brian Posehn**, known for his roles on the WB’s *Mission Hill* and Comedy Central’s *Sarah Silverman Show*.

- **Lavell Crawford**, known for his role on *Breaking Bad* (which obviously was not a comic role!).
- **Pete Holmes**, host of the Conan O’Brien companion talk show *The Pete Holmes Show*.
- **Cristela Alonzo**, the first Latina to create and star in a network sitcom, *Cristela*.
- **Ryan Hamilton**, named as one of *Rolling Stone*’s five comics to watch.

Other nationwide comics coming this year include Ilza Shlesinger of Dallas and Jerrod Carmichael from Los Angeles, as well as Jim Jefferies from far-off Australia.

Shows that will include multiple comedians include the return of the Best of the Midwest and — pick your poison — either “The Clean Comedy Showcase” or “The Dirty Show” (at least you know what you’re in for!). There are also several Amateur Stand-up Showcases and the National Stand-up Comedy Showcase.

But in addition to all the comics, you’ll find other remarkably varied programming such as family-oriented fare like “Kids Joke Night,” “Youth Art Showcase,” “Saturday Night Teen Zone” and the “Seriously Funny Family Adventure Challenge.” There are seven improv teams set to take the stage across the 10 days, and there’s even a “People and Pets” event where you’re invited to bring your furry friends. And of course, there’s that race you can run in your underwear!

The title of the festival is officially Gilda’s Laughfest because of its association with Gilda’s Club Grand Rapids. The national association of Gilda’s Club is a community organization for people living with cancer, their families and friends. Local chapters provide meeting places in homey settings where those persons can join with others for emotional and social support. The organization was named in tribute to comic actress Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer in 1989. Proceeds from Laughfest benefit Gilda’s Club Grand Rapids, which is housed in a lovely, rambling home in a wooded setting in a residential neighborhood. It’s where my Laughter Yoga class took place.

My trip last year to Laughfest was also my first visit to the city of Grand Rapids, which very pleasantly surprised me with lots of interesting things to see and do. One of its principal attractions, the world-class **Frederik Meijer Gardens**, might be better visited in warmer months when everything is blooming, but I thoroughly enjoyed walking through the outdoor Sculpture Park, which has very large, dramatic statues such as *The American Horse*, 24-feet high. There’s also a large indoor tropical conservatory filled with exotic birds (time your visit for feeding time to see them at their most active). And don’t miss the Orchid Wall, with its 3,500 orchids ablaze with color. There’s also a “Carnivorous Plant House.” Don’t stick your fingers inside!

Elsewhere in the city is one of the most astounding homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright I’ve ever seen.

Meticulously restored, the Meyer May House bills itself as an opportunity to experience an original “Prairie House” as Wright envisioned it. Situated in a part of the city called Heritage Hill with beautiful 19th-century homes, Wright’s modern-looking structure surprisingly doesn’t seem out of place. Don’t just admire it from the outside. Take advantage of the free docent-led tours that offer many interesting facts about the original owners (you can see how tiny they were from their beds upstairs) and about Frank Lloyd Wright himself (he liked to “hide” the front doors). The furniture inside the home is especially impressive, most notably the dining room with lighting fixtures built right into its enormous table. There and elsewhere, you’ll be set agog by all the leaded glass and Tiffany lamps.

Grand Rapids was the hometown of Gerald Ford, our 38th president, and you won’t want to miss a visit to the **Ford Presidential Library and Museum**. You’ll see not only exhibits of memorabilia associated with Ford’s life, such as his high school year book and college fraternity photos, but also artifacts of his presidency such as the pistol “Squeaky” Fromme used to try to assassinate him and the official document extending a pardon to Richard Nixon.

The fascinating exhibits include glittering gifts from foreign heads of state like a diamond-studded gold falcon from the sultan of Oman, and also take a look at the turbulent history of the ’70s, even offering reminders of the pop culture of the times, like go-go boots and leisure suits. You can easily spend a couple hours in this fascinating museum. The president and his beloved wife, Betty, are buried on the grounds outside.

A short walk from the Ford Museum is the **Grand Rapids Public Museum**, which explodes with nostalgic exhibits like replicas of a streetscape from the 1890s and a vividly painted carousel from 1928 — go ahead and take a spin. The amazing hodgepodge of other exhibits is all organized by letters of the alphabet (P is for pewter! Q is for quilts!), and you can entertain yourself not just by looking at them but by taking part in a scavenger hunt you can call up on your smartphone. Expect to be entertained as well as informed — the whimsical displays included Bozo the Clown on a rocking horse.

So if you can’t make it to Grand Rapids for Laughfest, make a point of getting there at another time. You will quite likely be impressed. And if you make it there for Laughfest, you most definitely will laugh! ☺

The full list of Laughfest’s offerings can be seen at [www.laughfestgr.org](http://www.laughfestgr.org), where tickets can also be purchased. Be forewarned: Some of these hilarious acts will definitely sell out, so don’t expect to always be able to buy tickets at the door. For more information on the city itself, go to [www.experiencegr.com](http://www.experiencegr.com).